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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001208

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/21/2019

TAGS: KIRF PGOV SCUL SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RELIGIOUS GROUP INELIGIBLE TO
REGISTER WITH BLIND PASTOR

REF: ASHGABAT 1065

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) On September 20, poloff met with Turkmenbashi-based Pastor Timur Muradov of the unregistered Word of Life Church. He was in Ashgabat prior to heading off the next day to a church conference in Moscow. Muradov's group had submitted an application for registration to the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) last year. When poloff last had an extended conversation with Muradov in November 2008, the application was pending and Muradov was optimistic, citing improved approachability in his contacts with the CRA. (Note: The CRA does the government's initial screening of applications for registration by religious groups. When the CRA is satisfied that applications are properly completed, it forwards them the to Ministry of Justice (MOJ) for further review and approval. End Note) At yesterday's meeting, Muradov informed poloff that the group's application had been returned by the CRA to the group via mail about six months ago. The ostensible reason for rejection was "grammatical errors," although Muradov understood that the actual reason was that Muradov was blind and the CRA would not approve a religious group whose leader was blind. It was coreligionist Elena Stryukova, pastor of the unregistered Word of Life Church in Ashgabat, who had been told this, at the same time she was told that her religious group could not have a female leader (reftel).

¶2. (C) Muradov characterized the government's dealings with his group as "psychological warfare." However, the group plans to resubmit its application in October. Another group member who recently returned from Bible school training in Baku, Gurban, will be named as the group's leader for registration purposes. Gurban said that, as the group's new "leader," he is under constant surveillance and cannot meet with more than three people at a time. In practice, Muradov will remain the head pastor. He said, despite lacking registration, the membership of his church, which is one-half Azeri and one-half Armenian, manages to gather in small groups, no more than 7-8 persons at a time. He averred that many more people would attend if the group was registered and people felt it was safe to come. Although Muradov said he is able to work "normally" in Turkmenbashi, carrying out various

charitable activities, he mentioned that four months ago, his picture was posted at the neighborhood police post for ten days with the caption "sectarian." He could not explain why it was posted, but it was taken down after Murdadov's wife complained.

¶3. (C) COMMENT: Muradov remains irrepressibly upbeat despite the difficulties he has encountered. He did, however, seek advice about how to challenge the government's failure to comply with the legal requirements of the Turkmen constitution and legislation to allow religious freedom. In that sense, he failed to grasp that, beyond the obstacles posed by the CRA or MOJ, systemic change is needed within the government in order for it to provide a mechanism to protect the rights of its citizens. END COMMENT.

CURRAN